Dating the Oldest New Testament Manuscripts

by Peter van Minnen

The New Testament text we read in our English Bibles is based on the original Greek text. We know this text, albeit imperfectly, through a large number of ancient manuscripts. All these manuscripts are mere copies, and the great majority of them are copies of copies, yet ultimately they all derive from the originals. In the process of copying, however, scribal errors are bound to occur. There is not a single copy wholly free from mistakes. A science called textual criticism deals systematically with these mistakes to eliminate as many of them as possible. The most important tools for textual critics are the manuscripts themselves.

In the sixteenth century the Greek New Testament was published for the first time in printed form. The great Dutch philologist Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam had established a text from a handful of manuscripts dating from the later Middle Ages. Unfortunately he used only manuscripts of inferior quality for his edition of 1516. A few verses from the Apocalypse were lacking in the manuscripts at his disposal. He simply re-translated them from the current Latin version! Erasmus' intention with his edition was to provide a basis for a new Latin translation of the New Testament. The Reformers used it to produce vernacular translations of their own.

Until the nineteenth century New Testament scholars and translators availed themselves only sparingly of other manuscripts. Then, within a fairly short period, a number of manuscripts of superior quality became available, mainly thanks to the work of the German scholar Constantin Tischendorf. These manuscripts dated from the fourth and fifth centuries and presented a text that was at least free from the accretions of a later age. We had to wait, however, until the 70's and 80's of the nineteenth century for new critical editions of the New Testament.

Tischendorf himself and the British scholars Westcott and Hort produced two rival editions of the Greek text. They believed that their text reflected the original as well as possible, even if it was based on manuscripts dating from at least three centuries after the New Testament was written. Gradually the new critical texts replaced Erasmus' text, which has not received much attention from serious scholars anymore. Thousands more ancient Greek manuscripts of the New Testament have become known in the past 100 years. Monastery libraries in countries around the Mediterranean have yielded most of the manuscripts. The textual critics of the Greek New Testament have been able to come to terms with

only a few of them. Most of them are not very old manuscripts anyhow, and in textual criticism it is age and quality that counts, not mere quantity.

In the 30's and 60's of the twentieth century a number of other, very important manuscripts have become available. We owe this to the efforts of two wealthy book collectors, Chester Beatty and Martin Bodmer. These manuscripts are of a special class for two reasons. They are written on papyrus and date from well before the fourth century. The earliest papyrus manuscripts come very close to the time when the New Testament was written. Of course, manuscripts on papyrus were known before, but these dated from a much later period and tended to be rather fragmentary. For almost all New Testament books we now have manuscripts earlier than the fourth century.

How do we know these manuscripts are so very early? How do we know their dates for certain? Some of you may think "scientific" tests on the physical structure of the papyrus may yield such dates. In fact they cannot, because such tests are very inaccurate. No, we can date papyrus manuscripts, any manuscript for that matter, simply by looking at the way it is written. Handwriting is a product of human culture and as such it is always developing. Differences in handwriting are bound to appear within one generation. Just compare the handwriting of your parents with your own. Or look at your own scribblings of a few years ago. It is the same handwriting as today but an expert, a paleographer, can distinguish not unimportant differences. He cannot establish the exact date but he can confidently place one handwriting in the 30's and another in the 80's. Even printed texts can easily be dated according to the outward appearance of the type or font used by the printer.

For such an ancient period as that between A.D. 100 and 300 it is of course much more difficult to be confident about the date of a manuscript. There is infinitely less comparative material. Nevertheless we are now in a fairly comfortable position to date papyrus manuscripts according to their handwriting. We do not have to rely on manuscripts of the New Testament only. We have hundreds of papyrus manuscripts of Greek pagan literary texts from this period and again hundreds of carefully written papyrus documents that show the same types of handwriting. These documents are very important for paleographers because they are often exactly dated. As a rule New Testament manuscripts on papyrus are not. A careful comparison of the papyrus documents and manuscripts of the second and third centuries has established beyond doubt that about forty Greek papyrus manuscripts of the New Testament date from this very period. Unfortunately only six of them are extensively preserved.

Even within the period that runs from c. A.D. 100-300 it is possible for paleographers to be more specific on the relative date of the papyrus manuscripts of the New Testament. For about sixty years now a tiny papyrus fragment of the Gospel

of John has been the oldest "manuscript" of the New Testament. This manuscript (P52) has generally been dated to ca. A.D. 125. This fact alone proved that the original Gospel of John was written earlier, viz. in the first century A.D., as had always been upheld by conservative scholars.

We now have early and very early evidence for the text of the New Testament. A classified list of the most important manuscripts will make this clear. Numbers preceded by a P refer to papyri, the letters refer to parchment manuscripts.

ca. A.D.	200	250	300	350	450
Matthew		P45	B	Sin.	
Mark		P45	B	Sin.	A
Luke		P4,P45,P75	B	Sin.	A
John	P66	P45,P75	B	Sin.	A
Acts		P45	B	Sin.	A
Romans-Hebrews	P46		B	Sin.	A
James-Jude			P72,B	Sin.	A
Apocalypse		P47		Sin.	A

As you can see, from the fourth century onwards the material base for establishing the text of the Greek New Testament is very good indeed. The manuscripts Sin. (Sinaiticus), A (Alexandrinus) and B (Vaticanus) are almost complete parchment manuscripts. With the help of the earlier papyrus manuscripts we have been able to establish that the text of these three great manuscripts is to a large extent reliable. The papyrus manuscript P75 was the latest to be published, but it showed a virtually identical text to manuscript B. This settled the vexed question whether we have in the parchment manuscripts of the fourth and fifth centuries a safe guide to the original text of the New Testament. We have.

That is not to say that we can dispense with later manuscripts of the New Testament. With the exception of Sin. the oldest manuscripts are not complete. Moreover they contain scribal errors of all sorts. P46 is a case in point: it is the manuscript with the largest percentage of blunders on record! Most of this kind of errors can, however, be removed by comparing the readings of the oldest manuscripts. The remaining puzzles can only be solved by taking later manuscripts into account. Most of the work in textual criticism in the past forty years has been done by Kurt Aland in Münster and Bruce Metzger in Princeton. The latest translations of the New Testament are based on their work.

It is to be noticed that all the manuscripts listed above come from Egypt. The papyri were found there in the twentieth century. They are now in Dublin, Ann Arbor, Cologny (in Switzerland), the Vatican and Vienna. Sin. was found in a

monastery library on the slopes of Mount Sinai in the nineteenth century and brought to St. Petersburg. In 1933 it was sold to the British Museum in London for a mere 100,000 pounds. A was transferred from the patriarchal library at Alexandria in the seventeenth century and is now also in the British Library. B has been in the Vatican since the Middle Ages. We owe the early Egyptian Christians an immense debt. Those who are fortunate enough to be able to work with part of their heritage count their blessings every day.

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